

CLAIMS

What is Claimed is:

1. A method for providing support to a computer user from a computer display, wherein the computer is connectable to a computer network, the method comprising the steps of:
 - 5 (a) providing a help request object displayable and selectable from the computer display;
 - (b) upon selection of the help request object, sending a help request over the network requesting real time human assistance, wherein the help request comprises a requester identifier, and a payor identifier or an authorization ID;
 - 10 (c) receiving a helper network ID;
 - (d) establishing a communication link to the human helper over the network using the helper network ID;
 - (e) sending a specific help request to the helper over the network; and
 - (f) receiving help information from the human helper in response to the sent
15 specific help request.
2. A method as in Claim 1, further comprising providing a help video display object for displaying a video image of the human helper on the computer display.
3. A method as in Claim 2, wherein the video display object is periodically updated with more recent video images of the human helper.
- 20 4. A method as in Claim 1, further comprising providing a help audio object for sending an audio stream from the human helper's voice through the computer.
5. A method as in Claim 1, further comprising providing a help video display object for displaying a video image of the human helper on the computer display and providing an audio object for transmitting an audio signal of the human helper's voice to the requester over
25 the network.
6. A method as in Claim 1, further comprising providing a selectable screen-sharing object, which, upon selection, sends at least one image of the user screen to the human helper over the network.
7. A method as in Claim 1, further comprising providing a selectable remote control
30 enable object, which upon selection, enables the human helper to remotely move a cursor and remotely make keyboard entries onto the user computer display.

8. A method as in Claim 1, wherein the help request includes help request attributes selected from the group consisting of user identifier and subject matter identifier.

9. A method as in Claim 8, wherein the help request attributes further comprises user subject matter mastery level.

5 10. A method as in Claim 8, wherein the help request attributes further include an organization the user is associated with.

11. A method for handling help requests from digital device users, the method comprising the steps of:

10 (a) receiving a help request from a networked digital device user; and
(b) sending the help request over a network to a human assistant in their educational institution in a supervised classroom setting, wherein the help request is automatically routed to the human assistant.

12. A method as in Claim 11, wherein the sending help request step is performed by a help facilitator organization, further comprising obtaining a network address of the human assistant, and sending the human assistant network address to the network address from which the help request came, to enable the help requester and human assistant to establish a communication link over the network.

13. A kit comprising:
a product; and
20 a computer readable media having at least one computer program thereon,
wherein the computer program can be executed on a computer to establish a connection over a computer network to a human information provider, wherein the program establishes an audio link having the voice of the human information provider, wherein the audio link includes the human information provider's voice being provided
25 through the computer.

14. The kit as in claim 13, wherein the computer has a display, wherein the computer program also establishes a video link which includes the human information provider's picture being provided through the computer display.

15. The kit as in claim 13, wherein the computer program establishes the connection
30 to a network address on the computer network for the human information provider, wherein the human information provider has specialized knowledge regarding the product.

16. The kit as in claim 13, wherein the computer readable media includes information about the product.

17. The kit as in claim 13, wherein the computer readable media includes a product manual for the product.

5 18. The kit as in claim 13, further comprising a microphone adapted to be coupled to the computer.

19. The kit as in claim 13, further comprising an earphone adapted to be coupled to the computer.

10 20. The kit as in claim 13, further comprising a headset microphone adapted to be coupled to the computer.

21. The kit as in claim 13, in which the human information provider is associated with an information providing organization, in which the computer program includes an Internet address for the information providing organization.

22. The kit as in claim 21, in which the Internet address is a URL.

15 23. A kit comprising:

a product; and

a computer readable media includes a computer network address

for a human information provider, wherein establishing a connection over the computer network using the network address establishes at least an audio link having the voice of the human information provider and wherein the audio link includes the human' information provider's voice being provided through the computer.

24. The kit as in claim 23, in which the computer includes a video display and which further includes a picture of the human information provider's face being provided through the computer display.

25 25. The kit as in claim 24 in which the human information provider's picture is repeatedly updated.

26. The kit as in claim 23, wherein the computer program establishes the connection to the network address for the human information provider, wherein the human information provider has specialized knowledge regarding the product.

30 27. The kit as in claim 23, wherein the computer readable media includes information about the product.

28. The kit as in claim 23, wherein the computer readable media includes a product manual for the product.

29. The kit as in claim 23, further comprising a microphone adapted to be coupled to the computer.

5 30. The kit as in claim 23, further comprising an earphone adapted to be coupled to the computer.

31. The kit as in claim 23, further comprising a combination earphone microphone adapted to be coupled to the computer.

10 32. The kit as in claim 23, in which the human information provider is associated with an information providing organization, in which the computer program includes an Internet address for the information providing organization.

33. The kit as in claim 32, in which the Internet address is a URL.

34. A method for providing information over a communications network, the method comprising the steps of:

15 (a) receiving a help request in a subject area from a networked digital device user over the network, wherein the digital device is selected from the group consisting of personal computers, hand held computers, personal digital assistants, hard wired computer terminals, wireless computer terminals, cellular telephones, hard wired telephones, wireless telephones, embedded devices, interactive TV and combinations thereof;

(b) automatically selecting a human assistant to provide help to the user, wherein the human assistant has knowledge in the subject area, the human assistant is available to provide the help in the subject area; and

25 (c) automatically establishing a communication link between the user and the human assistant over the network to allow the selected human assistant to provide help to the user over the network.

35. A method as in Claim 34, wherein the receiving help request step is received over the Internet.

30 36. A method as in Claim 34, wherein the selecting step includes selecting based on a level of human assistant knowledge in the subject matter.

37. A method as in Claim 34, further comprising maintaining a history of the amount of help provided by the human assistants, wherein the selecting step includes selecting at least in part based on the amount of help the human assistants have provided based on the history.

38. A method as in Claim 34, further comprising obtaining a subject matter mastery level for the user and obtaining a subject matter mastery level for the human assistants, wherein the selecting step includes selecting at least in part based on matching the subject matter mastery levels of the human assistant to the user.

39. A method as in Claim 38, wherein the obtaining user subject matter mastery level step includes obtaining explicitly provided subject matter mastery level information supplied by a source selected from the group consisting of the user and the human assistant.

40. A method as in Claim 38, wherein the obtaining user subject matter mastery level for the user includes estimating the mastery level based on a history of previous help requests from the user.

41. A method as in Claim 38, wherein the obtaining human assistant subject matter mastery level includes at least in part estimating the subject matter mastery level from a history of previous help provided.

42. A method as in Claim 34, wherein the establishing communication link step includes obtaining a network address for the human assistant and passing the human assistant network address to the user to enable the user to establish a network connection to the human assistant.

43. A method as in Claim 34, wherein the establishing communication link step includes obtaining a network address for the user and passing the user network address to the human assistant to enable the human assistant to establish a network connection to the user.

44. A method as in Claim 34, wherein the receiving help request step results from the user manipulating a help object on the computer user display.

45. A method as in Claim 44, wherein the network includes the Internet, wherein the establishing communication link step includes obtaining an Internet protocol address for the selected human assistant and passing the selected human assistant Internet protocol address to the user to enable the user to establish an Internet connection to the selected human assistant.

46. A method as in Claim 45, wherein the user establishes a communication link including receiving video and/or voice from the human assistant.

47. A method for a human user obtaining information about a product from a user computer coupleable over a computer network to an information provider organization computer having a selected human information provider using the information provider computer, the method comprising:

- 5 establishing a network connection between the user computer and the information provider computer over the computer network;
- sending a unique computer user identifier from the user computer to be received by the information provider computer over the network connection;
- matching the received computer user identifier to a record containing information
10 about the computer user;
- establishing a direct network connection to the selected human information provider from among a plurality of human information providers as a function of the information in the record; and
- displaying the record to the human information provider on a display coupled to
15 the information provider computer.

48. The method as in claim 47, in which the record information includes the preferred language of the user.

49. The method as in claim 47, in which the record information includes a product previously inquired about by the user.

20 50. The method as in claim 47, in which the record information includes a product knowledge level previously attained by the user.

51. The method as in claim 47, in which the record information includes a product knowledge area previously inquired about by the user.

25 52. The method as in claim 47, further comprising receiving voice information requests from the human user, by the human information provider, regarding the product, over the network connection.

53. The method as in claim 52, further comprising the human information provider entering new data into the record based on the human user voice requests.

54. The method as in claim 47, in which the unique identifier is a cookie.

30 55. The method as in claim 47, is generate by the user computer upon a first execution of a program on the user computer.

56. A method for obtaining information about a product, the method comprising:
coupling a computer readable media to a user computer, wherein the computer
readable media includes product information and an executable computer program;
causing the executable computer program executing in the user computer to send
5 a connection request to an information provider organization that is capable of providing
live human provided information about the product;
receiving a network address for an information provider computer associated with
the information provider organization;
establishing a connection between the user computer and the information
10 providing computer based on the received network address; and
sending a unique user identifier over the network from the user computer to the
information provider computer.

57. A method as in claim 56, in which the unique user identifier is unique to the user
computer.

15 58. The method as in claim 57, in which the unique identifier is specific to an human
user using the user computer.

59. The method as in claim 58, in which the unique identifier is generated by the
information providing computer and is stored in the user computer.

60. The method as in claim 59, in which the unique identifier is created by the
20 program as a function of reading hardware and/or software components of the user computer.

61. The method as in claim 59, further comprising sending an indication of the
product or product type over the network to the information providing computer.

62. The method as in claim 59, further comprising receiving a live video display of
the human information provider associated with the information providing organization.

25 63. The method as in claim 59, further comprising receiving an audio stream of a
human information provider voice associated with the information providing organization.

64. A method for supporting a product, the method comprising:
selling a supported product kit including a product and a computer readable media
having an executable program thereon, the program having instructions for executing a
30 method for establishing a connection over a computer network to a human information
provider;

accepting a request for information over the computer network originating from the computer program sold with the product in the supported product kit;

accepting a unique identifier from the computer network originating from the computer program sold with the product in the product support kit;

5 creating a record associated with the unique identifier for storing user information associated with that unique identifier;

 sending voice audio carrying signals from the human information provider associated with the information providing organization to the user computer;

 receiving voice requests from a human user regarding the product; and

10 storing user information in the record as a function of the received user voice requests.

65. The method as in claim 64, further comprising received voice information from the human user about the human user and storing user information in the record as a function of the voice information received about the human user.

15 66. The method as in claim 64, further comprising sending voice audio carrying signals from the human information provider associated with the information providing organization to the user computer based at least in part on information that was stored in the record from a past session.

20 67. The method as in claim 65, further comprising sending voice audio carrying signals from the human information provider associated with the information providing organization to the user computer based at least in part on information that was stored in the record from a past session.

25 68. The method as in claim 64, further comprising routing the human user to the human information provider associated with the information providing organization based at least in part on information that was stored in the record from a past session.

69. The method as in claim 65, further comprising routing the human user to the human information provider associated with the information providing organization based at least in part on information that was stored in the record from a past session.

30 70. The method as in claim 64, wherein the information stored in the record is selected from the group consisting of user age, user gender, user residence location, user language, user expertise level with the product, user intended use for the product, the product,

indicated possible future products to be purchased, and other products already purchased by the human user.

71. The method as in claim 65, wherein the information stored in the record is selected from the group consisting of user age, user gender, user residence location, user language, user expertise level with the product, user intended use for the product, the product, indicated possible future products to be purchased, and other products already purchased by the human user.

72. The method as in claim 66, wherein the information stored in the record is selected from the group consisting of user age, user gender, user residence location, user language, user expertise level with the product, user intended use for the product, the product, indicated possible future products to be purchased, and other products already purchased by the human user.

73. The method as in claim 67, wherein the information stored in the record is selected from the group consisting of user age, user gender, user residence location, user language, user expertise level with the product, user intended use for the product, the product, indicated possible future products to be purchased, and other products already purchased by the human user.

74. A method for supporting a product, the method comprising:

accepting a request for information over a computer network originating from user computer executing a computer program sold with a product;

accepting a unique identifier from the computer network originating from the computer program sold with the product;

creating a record associated with the unique identifier for storing user information associated with that unique identifier;

sending voice audio carrying signals from a human information provider over the network to the user computers;

receiving voice requests from a human user regarding the product over the network; and

storing user information in the record as a function of the received user voice requests.

75. The method as in claim 74, further comprising sending video carrying signals over the computer network to the human user, wherein the video signals include an updated picture of the human information provider.

5 76. The method as in claim 74, in which the human user has a computer display, further comprising the human information provider viewing essentially the same computer display as the human user.

77. The method as in claim 74, in which the human user has a manually operable computer interaction device, further comprising the human information provider remotely manipulating the human user's computer interaction device.

10 78. The method as in claim 77, in which the computer manipulation device is selected from the group consisting of cursor movement devices, display selection devices, and character entry devices.

15 79. The method as in claim 77, in which the computer manipulation device is selected from the group consisting of mice, trackballs, and touchpads, wherein the display selection devices are buttons, and the character entry devices include keyboards.

80. A method of doing business comprising:
selling a product, and a first amount of live, human assistance together for a single price;

20 wherein the human assistance is provided by a human assistant over a communications network to a digital device located within hearing distance of a human user of the product; and offering an additional amount of live human assistance over the communications network to the digital device when the first amount of assistance has been consumed.

25 81. The method as in claim 80, in which the digital device is a computer device and wherein the live human assistance includes a live audio signal carrying the human assistant's voice.

82. The method as in claim 81, in which the digital device is a computer device having a display and in which the live human assistance includes a live video signal carrying the human assistant's image.

83. The method as in claim 80, in which the digital device is a wireless mobile phone having a display and wherein the human assistance includes a live audio signal carrying the human assistant's voice and an updated video signal carrying the human assistant's image.

84. The method of doing business as in claim 81 further comprising providing screen sharing between the human product user and the human assistant, in which screen sharing the human assistant can see the computer display as seen by the human user.

85. The method of doing business as in claim 81, wherein the computer includes entry devices for interacting with the computer, further comprising providing the human assistant the ability to manipulate the computer entry devices over the communications network.

86. The method of doing business as in claim 85, in which the computer entry devices are selected from the group consisting of cursor movement devices and character entry devices.

87. A method of doing business comprising:
selling a product and a first amount of live human assistance together for a single price;

wherein the human assistance is provided by a human assistant over a communications network to a computer device to a human user of the product; and
wherein the human assistance includes a real-time audio signal having the human assistant's voice and an updated real time video signal having the human assistant's image.

88. A method of doing business as in claim 87, in which the assistance is provided through a computer readable media having an executable program thereon, in which the computer program when executed can establish a communications link over a communications network to an assistance center computer having the human assistant thereby.

89. The method of doing business as in claim 88, in which the computer readable media includes an indication of the product purchased, and in which the product purchase indication is transmitted to the assistance center over the network.

90. The method of doing business as in claim 89, in which the human assistant is one of a plurality of human assistants, in which the human assistant is selected at least in part as a function of the product purchase indication transmitted over the network.

91. The method of doing business as in claim 90, in which the human assistant is one of a plurality of human assistants, in which the human product user has a history of using the

assistance center and wherein this history is at least partially stored in a computer readable record, wherein the human assistant is selected at least in part as a function of information in the computer readable record.

5 92. The method of doing business as in claim 91, in which the record includes an expertise level for the user, and in which the human assistant is selected at least in part as a function of expertise level information in the computer readable record.

93. The method of doing business as in claim 90, in which the plurality of human assistants are geographically dispersed.

10 94. The method of doing business as in claim 90, in which at least some of the human assistants work alone, in buildings separate from other human assistants.

95. The method of doing business as in claim 90, in which at least some of the human assistants work alone, in buildings separate from other human assistants, and in cities apart from other assistants.

15 96. The method of doing business as in claim 90, in which at least some of the human assistants work for a virtual information providing organization.

20 97. A method of promoting an information providing service, the method comprising:
providing a first amount of live, human assistance over a computer network;
providing a product bundled with the provided human assistance;
wherein the human assistance is provided by a human associated with the
information providing service;
wherein the human assistance includes at least live human voice assistance
provided over the computer network to a human purchaser of the product;
wherein the human user receives the human assistance through a computer device
coupled to the computer network;
25 wherein the first amount of live human assistance is provided at no charge to the
product user; and
providing additional live human assistance over the computer network to the
product user after the first amount of live human assistance has been consumed.

30 98. The method as in claim 97, in which the live, human assistance includes an updated video picture of the human assistant provided over the computer network to the product user.

99. The method as in claim 97, further comprising recording information received from the product user in a computer record and providing additional, live human assistance at least in part based on the record information.

5 100. The method as in claim 99, in which the live, human assistance is provided in at least a first and a second session, in which the assistance provided in the second session is based at least in part on record information from the first session.

101. The method as in claim 97, further comprising offering for a fee human assistance over the computer network to the product user for products different from the first product.

10 103. A method for providing support experience for a plurality of students in a supervised setting in an educational institution, wherein the students are reachable or addressable through communication while in the supervised setting, the method comprising the steps of:

(a) receiving a support request from a remote requester in a subject area, wherein the requester is remote from the student;

15 (b) selecting a student to provide assistance to the requester while the student is in the supervised setting; and

(c) establishing a communication link between the requester and the student to allow two-way communication between the requester and the student while the student is in the supervised setting.

20 104. A method as in Claim 103, wherein the establishing communication link step includes establishing an audio communication link between the student and the requester.

105. A method as in Claim 104, wherein the establishing communication link step includes establishing a video communication link from the student to the user.

106. A method as in Claim 105, wherein the establishing communication link step includes establishing an audio and video communication from the student to the user.

25 107. A method as in Claim 103, further comprising providing digital device and communication hardware to the educational institution, wherein the digital device is selected from the group consisting of personal computers, hand held computers, personal digital assistants, hard wired computer terminals, wireless computer terminals, cellular telephones, hard wired telephones, wireless telephones, embedded devices, interactive TV and combinations thereof, wherein the digital device hardware and communication hardware are coupled to the
30 communication link and are used by the students to provide help to the user.

108. A method as in Claim 103, wherein the selecting student step is based at least in part on selection criteria selected from the group consisting of subject matter mastery level matching between the student and the user, the immediate availability of the student, the time zone matching of the student and the user, previous dealings between the student and the user, and the amount of help provided by the student, and combinations thereof.

109. A method as in Claim 103, further comprising pre-screening the students before they are allowed to participate in the supervised setting.

110. A method as in Claim 103, wherein the receiving support request is received over the Internet, wherein the selecting student step is performed over the Internet, wherein the establishing communication link includes establishing an Internet connection between the requester and the student.

111. A method for managing a student populated help support center at an educational institution, the method comprising the steps of:

- (a) providing a data communication link to the help support center;
- (b) providing a human interface device at the help support center affiliated with the educational institution, wherein the human interface device is coupled to the data communication link and allows communication between the data communication link and a human being at the human interface device;
- (c) providing a supervising instructor at the help support center;
- (d) providing a plurality of help requests from help requesters located remotely to the help support center;
- (e) selecting a student to answer the help request over the data communication link and using the human interface device; and
- (f) directing the help request to the selected student.

112. A method as in Claim 111, wherein the human interface device is selected from the group consisting of computer terminals, computers, wired telephones, wireless telephones, personal digital assistance, embedded devices, interactive TV and text-based entry devices.

113. A method as in Claim 111, wherein the providing plurality of help requests step, the selecting student step, and the directing help requests step are all performed by a help facilitator organization.

114. A method as in Claim 111, wherein the provided supervising instructor provides instruction to the students prior to allowing students to be selected for calls.

115. A method as in Claim 111, wherein the selecting students step is based at least in part on the subject matter mastery of the student and the availability of the student.

5 116. A method as in Claim 111, wherein the provided supervising instructor is enabled to monitor communication between the students and the remote help requesters.